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AS FAR AS THE EAST IS FROM THE WEST

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As the Westerner newly arrived in China gazes for the first time on the teeming life in the streets of a port-city, the familiar phrase haunts his mind with a new significance. As he takes his first railway journey or penetrates into the interior by boat, the wonder grows. What is the significance of all these mysterious sights and still more mysterious sounds and how can the Westerner with his hopelessly different background ever succeed in getting into contact with the people? The problem is the same whether the questioner be a representative of a Western Government, a business man desirous of making connections in China or a missionary of any one of the Christian bodies at work in this great land. The question of paramount importance for all alike is first that of understanding and secondly that of establishing contact with the people. Yet all the time the East seems so very far from the West.

There have been those in the past who have bridged the gulf by the sheer power of their personality or by way of toilsome study and these were great and rare spirits. Nowadays there are easier ways of access and the first of these is a Language School, for language is a key which unlocks many doors of approach to a nation.

Schools of Language Study have been established at several centres in China. That at Peking is known as the North China Union Language School and the language taught is Mandarin, the official language of China. The school began its work ten years ago. Since then it has increased steadily in size and importance until at the present time it has a student body numbering 160, representing legations and business firms as well as many missionary bodies. The staff of Chinese teachers numbers over 70. The school is under the direction of Mr. W. B. Pettus, whose scientific study of language teaching and phonetics has made its impress upon all the teaching work.

Every student spends some part of each day with an individual teacher and for the rest the work is done in small

groups varying in number from three or four to ten or twelve. The teachers are trained in the most modern methods; those which are used to teach foreign languages to young people in all the best schools of the West—methods adapted of course in some respects in view of the harassing peculiarities of the Chinese language. It is a common remark among people who have spent any time in China that the Chinese show a natural power of dramatic expression which amounts almost to genius. Whoever has gone through a term or two in the Language School will be prepared heartily to endorse this view. One learns not only the names of objects in the class room but the Chinese words and phrases for many common actions and even states of mind simply through the medium of imaginative and descriptive acting. Each day the first lesson is devoted to the teaching of new words and phrases: during the remainder of the day the same words and phrases are used in conversation between teacher and pupil in every conceivable way until it seems almost impossible that even the least retentive brain should ever lose hold of the precious possessions. But as it has been shown by experience that such a thing is after all only too possible, subsequent days find the teachers reviewing again and again the total vocabulary so that words and phrases ‘come trippingly to the tongue’ until one day the student makes the amazing discovery that the phrase which seemed so hard produces the correct response when he tries it on the “boy” and realizes with a thrill that he is really beginning to talk.

At first the prospect of spending four or five hours a day in listening to and imitating the same small selection of words suggests possibilities of infinite boredom. But these possibilities are almost entirely eliminated by a clever system of short periods and change of teachers. It is a most convincing demonstration of the fact of personality to notice in what infinitely varied ways half a dozen men handle the business of teaching the same few words and phrases. Moreover it is not long before even this small vocabulary can be woven into a real conversation. It is a fact that students in their fourth or fifth week at school ask questions about

Chinese history, customs, politics or religion and understand the answers. Certainly the language used is of the simplest and it cannot be denied that the pupils tend to develop what the teacher already possess in such high degree—a certain facility in gesture and facial expression—but that after all is almost as essential to the man who would reach the hearts of the Chinese people as a rich vocabulary and irreproachable tones.

To the student who is anxious to understand China as she is today there is something very stimulating in the contact with the kind of minds represented by the staff of the Language School, the majority of whom are alert young men, interested in current questions in their own country and up-to-date on modern movements. Lest this sound somewhat abstract, it should be emphasized that a student who profits by the teaching of even the first two or three weeks should find himself able you get his domestic needs attended to or to engage in the general pursuit of purchasing by the most approved methods of bargaining or even, if naturally endowed with financial acumen, he may have an insight into the intricacies of Chinese Coinage, for these are but a few of the many subjects which are touched upon in Chinese conversation. To serious students of the language ability to read is an essential, so the business of learning characters is begun after the first few weeks in school. Later the subject of writing with character analysis is added to the list of daily occupations.

But the acquisition of language alone is not sufficient to solve the problem of the contact of East and West, for if the West has anything to contribute to the new civilization which is going to be built up in the East there must be knowledge of the foundations in national character and tradition upon which the new structure must of necessity be laid. There is not time during the brief sojourn which most students make at the Language School for exhaustive courses in Chinese Government, History, Philosophy or Religion, but there are valuable Seminars on the subjects as well as occa-

sional lectures on many other topics, which open up to the students avenues of approach to vast fields of study and give them at least a glimpse of the wonders of the thought-life of China. To supplement such courses visits are taken to many of the places of historical interest which abound in Peking or to institutions representative of the new life in China such as factories or charitable institutions. On a fine afternoon the inhabitants of a certain quarter are amazed at the spectacle of thirty foreigners proceeding in rickshas to make a tour of inspection of theatres and places of amusement, the first being part of an inquiry into the opportunities for recreation in Peking. Truly it is a varied course of study which is offered to the student of an up-to-date Language School.

But there is yet another subject on the curriculum of this school, second to none in educational value. It is that of human contact. Too often it has been the case in the past that the Government officials, business men and missionaries lived in splendid isolation, each group going their separate ways and setting by their attitude a hard puzzle to the thoughtful Oriental. Further there are missions of some scores of Christian bodies at work in China and even these have not understood each other or been able constantly and clearly to see in one another members of the Body of Christ. Now, the future representatives of all these groups are together in a Language School. They play volley ball together in recess and struggle in fellowship with the intricacies of tones and characters. Such things make for comradeship. In lectures and in the short chapel service which bring all the students together in the middle of the morning's work the note of service in its widest meaning is often struck and finds a response in the hearts of men and women of many nationalities and points of view.

Thus day by day China is being interpreted to men and women from the West that they in due time may interpret China to their own nations and that both may realize that the distance of East from West is not the final word.